

THE EMBROIDERED “SHROUDS”. SYMBOLOGY AND ICONOLOGY OF THE LITURGICAL VEILS
OF THE BYZANTINE RITE

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“Let all mortal flesh fall silent and stand in awe and trembling. Have no earthly thoughts: as the King of kings and the Lord of lords is approaching to be sacrificed and given as food to believers. Choirs of angels precede him, with every principality and authority, the many-eyed cherubim and six-winged seraphim who cover their faces and sing the hymn: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia”. This hymn accompanies – in the celebration of the Vespers of the divine liturgy of St Basil on Holy Saturday – the majestic procession that crosses the entire church, to take the gifts to be consecrated in the sanctuary, bearing them through the royal door and laying them on the altar. This slow procession – called the Great Entrance – is the most spectacular moment of the divine liturgy in the Constantinople rite (it was defined the *climax* in the Byzantine rite), common to all the Orthodox Churches; the singing of another hymn called the *Cheroubikòn* is prescribed, whose text and music are equally impressive but which does not however allude to the voluntary sacrifice of the supreme sovereign and high priest. Taking advantage of the fact that this liturgy had already perfected the structure of the ritual in use today we prefer not to describe the Great Entrance in our own words, preferring those of St Nicola Cabasilas, the great fourteenth century mystagogue: “The priest, after glorifying God aloud, goes to the Prothesis table, takes the Oblations, holds them up with great respect at head height and exits. He carries them in this way into the sanctuary advancing, for this purpose, through the crowd, with a slow and solemn procession along the nave. The faithful, who are singing too, prostrate themselves at his passage with respect and veneration, beseeching him to remember them in the presentation of the gifts. The priest advances, with a procession of lights and incense, and thus he enters the sanctuary”.

Our attention focuses on a square veil which the deacon – or in his absence the priest - wears on his shoulders, tied at the neck while he is carrying the *dískos*, that is the paten with the bread to be consecrated. But at one time, precisely when Cabasilas was writing, this was not so: this is recorded for us by the iconographer. The fundamental axiom of oriental liturgy – according to which the Eucharistic celebration is the earthly echo of the heavenly cult eternally served by Christ who is the only true high priest before the Father in the tabernacle of heaven - at a certain moment introduced into the liturgical programme of the churches (in the sanctuary and in the Prothesis where the gifts to be consecrated are prepared) the iconographic theme of holy liturgy. This is, so to speak, brought to a halt and represented precisely in the moment of the Great Entrance: the

Saviour, in bishop's - indeed rather patriarchal – vestments, receives before the altar the oblations brought to him by a retinue of angels all dressed up as deacons and as priests. We are in fact in the cathedral of heaven, where Christ re-enacts his sacrifice liturgically, celebrating with the incorporeals, just as the bishop celebrates with his priests and his deacons. An archetypal model, for its completeness, of this iconographic motif – which was studied some time ago by Stefanescu – is the fresco from the second half of the fourteenth century in the Prothesis of the church of the Virgin *Peribleptos* at Mistra in the Peloponnese. An unexpected detail emerges with great spontaneity in this depiction: in the midst of a sea of angels bearing sacred vases, already prepared with the gifts, as well as candles, censers and liturgical fans, some of them close the end of the procession carrying on their shoulders, billowing like a sail filled with wind, a large cloth on which is visibly embroidered the image of Christ dead, in a position that we may call Shroud-like. We see here a detail of the Mistra fresco (figs. 1a-1b), as well as a further depiction of this motif in the frescoes of the church of St Anthony at Vrontesi on the island of Crete (fig. 2), which is remarkable for its antiquity as it dates back to the second quarter of the fifteenth century. The iconographic representation can be compared to the description of the Great Entrance left us in the fifteenth century by St Simeon of Thessalonica: «Then there is the accompaniment and the entrance with magnificence of the venerable gifts, while readers, deacons and priests precede and follow with the holy vases...(After the bishop's *omophóron*) follow the deacons, who represent the order of the angels, then those bearing the divine gifts, after whom all the others and also those who carry on their heads the holy cloth (*épiplon*) on which is portrayed Jesus naked and dead”.

This cloth is the *aèr* in its original form – not yet reduced to its present size as a square – in other words the third veil, destined to be laid over the chalice and the *dískos*, after the removal of the other two, smaller veils (the *diskokálymma* and the *poterokálymma*), which covered them during the procession. For this reason St Theodore Studites, at the beginning of the eleventh century in his comment to the liturgy of the *Presantificati*, calls the *aèr* the “upper veil”, *anótaton péplon*. The *archieratikòn*, in other words the *Pontificale*, by the Protonotary Demetrio Ghemistos – who was the first witness, in 1380, of the liturgy of the Great Church after the *diátaxis* of the Patriarch Philotheos Kokkinos – lists in his description of the Great Entrance as coming after the deacons and the priests carrying the bread and the wine, “the deacons who bear, on their heads, the *aèr*». For experts of liturgical archaeology this veil with its abundant dimensions – it measured from 1 x 1.5 metres to 1.5 x 2.5 metres – was a substitute for the veil rolled around the columns of the ciborium which, already in the Justinian age, was unfurled and dropped at the moment of the symbol of faith – that is immediately after the Great Entrance – to cover the bowed head of the celebrating bishop and thus hide the transformation of the gifts from the eyes of the faithful (still today the concelebrating priests, holding the little square *aèr* by its four corners, shake it rhythmically over the bishop's bowed head). The etymology itself of this veil is probably linked to the flow of air produced by its fluttering (indeed *aèr* also means “air, atmosphere”); as however the same term also means “cloud”, it is also possible that, in liturgical symbolism, an allusion is made to the divine presence, biblically expressed by the cloud, over the oblations to be consecrated on which

the *aèr* is laid. It is indicative in this regard that some manuscript sources define it as the “holy cloud” (*haghía neféle*).

This upper veil, the *aèr*, originally must have been made of white linen or silk – as we may deduce from an account by the emperor Constantine Porphyrogenetos of the mid tenth century – but, at least from the late twelfth century onwards, it began to be embroidered with the figure of Christ naked and lying down, ready for sacrifice or already sacrificed, an iconographic typology which has hence traditionally been called the *amnòs*, that is the Lamb. Although the age of the pieces which have reached us would not be in itself indicative of the chronology of the iconographic subject, due to the highly perishable nature of textiles – so much so that Pauline Johnstone postponed by a century, to the beginning of the Paleologue age, the custom of embroidering liturgical veils - it is nevertheless indicative that the late twelfth century is precisely the period when the depiction of the *melismòs*, that is of the *fractio panis*, appears in its primitive form also in mural painting. In it the dead Christ, three-quarters inclined, is deposited on the funeral sheet flanked by two incorporeals who are holding the *rhípídia* which are the fans that the deacon waves over the consecrated species; his loincloth is substituted by the liturgical veil, the smaller one, which covers the *dískos* with the bread.

The most ancient example of the *melismòs* in mural painting is the one in the apse of the Church of the *Zoodóchos Pighì* (the *Virgin fountain of life*) of Samarina in Messenia (Peloponnesus) (fig. 3), where it is accompanied by the Gospel inscription “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him”, which leaves no room for any doubt about the Eucharistic validity of this iconographic model. The fresco, which dated back to the end of the twelfth century and beginning of the thirteenth, has now been lost, but in 1916 Gabriel Millet left us a sketch of it, and he already connected this iconography with the image of the Turin Shroud. The virtually coeval revival of this subject, at the foot of a crucifixion, in an enamelled reliquary from the Stroganoff Collection (fig. 4) in the Museum of the Hermitage of St Petersburg, bears an inscription in Greek: “Christ lies (dead) and God is dismembered” which sets it in direct connection with the rite of the *melismòs*.

The iconographic power of the latter was then to undergo a definitive evolution in the form that represents Christ as a child, lying no longer on the shroud but on a liturgical paten, the *dískos*, and surmounted by the *asterískos*, two little crossed and curved metal listels from which hang a star-shaped pendant whose function is to hold the little veil over the bread of the Eucharist. The scene is an altar, surmounted by the ciborium and flanked by two or more celebrant bishops and by angels with the *rhípídia*. The figure of the Christ child may be the iconographic reflection of the hagiographic motif of the child who reveals himself sacrificed on the altar in a typology of Eucharistic miracles, seen in the oriental setting and present, in the Latin environment, in the hagiographic tradition relating to St Gregory the Great. It is possible to hypothesise a link between this tradition and the shape of the star, which evokes the adoration of the Magi, provided by the pendant of the *asterískos*. A complete example of the iconography of the *melismòs* is provided by the veil of the Serbian monastery of Chiliandari on Monte Athos (fig. 5), which may be dated back to the Paleologue age. Nevertheless, it is precisely in a Serbian

monastery, the Markov Manastir, that there is the scene of the *melismòs*, painted between 1376 and 1377 in the apse of the Prothesis (fig. 6), which once again shows the adult Christ, with the liturgical veil in the place of the loincloth and the *asterískos* on his belly, laid on the altar, under the ciborium, and flanked by a bishop (St Peter, pope of Alexandria) and by a deacon saint.

Returning now to the iconic decoration of the ancient *aèr*, it appears to be decidedly conditioned by the symbolic interpretation that the more traditional initiation into the language of liturgical signs attached to this cloth. This is supported by the commentary which is falsely attributed to St Germanus of Constantinople, patriarch from 715 to 730, but which is in any case prior to 870, therefore when the *aèr* was not yet decorated. This commentary, in an overwhelming explosion of symbolism of the liturgical vestments, altar cloths and holy vessels (for which the chalice is at one and the same time the image of the vessel that collected the blood of Christ flowing from the wound in his side and the unguent that flows from his hands and from his feet, the image of the cup of the Last Supper, of the crater of Wisdom of biblical memory, besides the image of the breasts of the Virgin Mary) reserves for the veils, in a decidedly crammed and pompous way, symbolic values which are always and in any case connected with the burial of Christ. Indeed the *eiletòn*, that is the white linen laid on the altar, symbolises the shroud in which the body of Jesus was wrapped; the veil (*kálypsis*) which covers the *dískos* with the bread, is again the shroud; the *diskokálymma*, which covers the chalice, is the sudarium which was placed upon his face and finally the *aèr*, here called also *katapétasma*, the burial stone which closed and sealed the tomb of the Lord. Precisely for this reason, in the historical mystical interpretation of the Eucharist liturgy – from Syrian circles of the end of the fourth century, as the *Omèlie catechetique* of Theodore of Mopsuestia testify – the procession of the Great Entrance came to symbolise the funeral procession of Christ.

Seven centuries later, when there was already a great flourishing of *aères* embroidered with the figure of the *Amnòs* (Christ lying down), the great mystagogue of the last Byzantium period, St Simeon of Thessalonica, takes up this symbology again and points out that: once the gifts have been placed on the altar, after the Great Entrance, the priest covers them with the *aèr* (here it is also called the *epitáphios*), which symbolises the starry sky and the shroud in which was wrapped the body of Christ sprinkled with myrrh. Through these signs the mystery is presented with the clarity of a painting, the mystagogue observes, who then continues his argument developing the symbolism of the *astìr*, the star hanging from the *asterískos* on the particular gift to be consecrated, the *amnòs*, in this case the child who is lying in the manger in Bethlehem.

These ancient *aères* have reached us in two typologies, depending on whether the *amnòs*, that is the Christ deposed from the cross, is represented in a frontal position or inclined by three-quarters of the figure; for each of them we have an archetypal example, not as regards the chronology, but for the mastery of the product. The masterpiece of the *aères* with the frontal position is undoubtedly that of Stefan II Uros Milutin, Serbian sovereign from 1282 to 1321 (fig. 7), with an dedicatory inscription in Slav, already in the monastery of Banjska and today at the Museum of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Belgrade. This model is reproduced in the *aèr* of Michael, son of Cyprian (fig. 8), as

results from the dedicatory inscription in Greek, today at the Art Museum of the University of Princeton and also in the *aèr* of Edessa, in Greek Macedonia (fig. 9) which was restored several times, also in an arbitrary fashion, until the eighteenth century. In this typology the frontal Christ does not lie on the shroud: the *aèr* itself is his shroud. Instead of the loincloth there is placed the smallest liturgical veil, two “six-winged” seraphim and six angels in flight flank him (three on each side) proclaiming the hymn *Trisághion* and the starry sky background (substituted in the *aèr* of Edessa, in the clumsiest of its restorations, by plant elements) immediately evokes the allusion by Simeon of Thessalonica to the firmament and his stressed reference to the symbology of the *astèr*. To the image of Christ in the tomb, adored by angels, is thus ideally added that of the Child in the manger, adored by the Magi.

The other typology of *aèr* has as its masterpiece the so-called *epitáphios* of Thessalonica, which was brought to light in the year 1900 by the famous Russian Byzantinist Kondakov in a little church in Thessalonica and since 1994 has been kept at the Museum of Byzantine Civilization of that city (after previously being at the Byzantine Museum in Athens - fig. 10a). On this cloth – published in 1905 by Marcel Le Tourneau and Gabriel Millet and dated as being of the fourteenth century – the Christ, three-quarters inclined, like in the *melismòs*, and portrayed with a loincloth, lies on the funeral shroud and over him are bent in adoration two angels with the *rhipídia* and two angels in flight: underneath two “many-eyed” cherubim stand out, alternating with two “six-winged” seraphim, and it is no coincidence that they are explicitly mentioned in the Eucharistic anaphora. At the four corners (without borders) is placed the tetramorph, i.e. the symbols of the four Evangelists. That this is a genuine *aèr* is unequivocally demonstrated by the images, embroidered at the two extremities, of the communion of the apostles (six at each end) who receive from Christ the consecrated bread and the wine from the chalice (fig. 10b). In the two borders, respectively, are embroidered the words of the anamensis of the Eucharistic anaphora: “Take, eat, this is my body” and “drink, this is my blood, of the new alliance”. The same two scenes, with the same inscriptions (although they are more complete) decorate the two square liturgical veils, datable between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, of Castell’Arquato near Piacenza (figs. 11-12), two covers (*poterokálymma* and *diskoláymma*) respectively for the chalice and the paten, or two lateral fragments of a dismembered *aèr*, analogous to the Thessalonica one. The two veils of the treasure of the cathedral of Halbertstadt, Germany (fig. 13-14), have the same iconographic typology and as they are dated between 1185 and 1195 these might be among the oldest Byzantine liturgical textiles to have reached us.

At a certain point, perhaps precisely at the end of the fourteenth century, the liturgical function of the *aèr* changed and consequently its name changed as well, as it was no longer in keeping with its new use. Johnstone had already hypothesized that the great *aères* embroidered with the image of the *amnòs* had fallen into disuse due to their great size, remaining however objects of veneration hanging on the walls of the church (which is the position that is still today normal for the *epitáphios* that derived from the *aèr*). For Slobodan Curcic, once it had fallen into disuse as the veil for covering the oblations, the *aèr* would have seen its traditional symbolism of shroud of Christ emphasized, to the point of being set in a special funerary niche or aedicule, erected in many churches to

reproduce the aedicule of the Holy Sepulchre, in other words the tomb of Christ (fig. 15). The Serbian scholar refers in this regard to the late-antiquity custom of covering the burial of a sovereign with a cloth – citing expressly the *velamen purpureum* on Diocletian's tomb, which Ammianus Marcellinus described, and the one on Constantine's sepulchre, mentioned by Niceta Choniata. This cloth, when it was extended to the tombs of the saints, was embellished by embroidering the full figure icon of the saint, an iconographic theme studied by André Grabar. Perhaps the most ancient documentary evidence of this custom dates back to the period of Manuel Comnenos (1143-1180), when the cloth covering the tomb of the great martyr Demetrios, with the embroidered image of the saint lying down, was transferred from Thessalonica to Constantinople and Grabar does not fail to point out the synchrony of this testimony with the first iconographic documentations of the *melismòs*, that is Christ dead. As regards the subsequent centuries, innumerable examples of these handmade articles are on display in Russian museums. They have been removed from the tombs of the saints whose images, surrounded by the decorative interlacement of long inscriptions, revealed visually to the faithful – so to speak - the contents of the sepulchre which was inaccessible to view. An example for all is the admirable *pokròv* of St. Sergij of Radonez, made in about 1420, whose design is attributed to none other than St. Andrej Rublëv (fig. 16). The same scholar then hypothesises – but the archaeological documentation in this regard is extremely deficient – that in many mediaeval orthodox churches this *aèr*, which has by now become *epitáphios*, was kept and venerated under a cusp or domed baldacchino that was identified symbolically with the tomb of Christ, and that the *Sveti Tskhoveli* in the cathedral of Mtskheta in Georgia (fig. 17) was inspired by this, as was the “capital of the Crucifixion” in St Mark's in Venice (fig. 18).

The presence of the scene of the dual communion of the Apostles, at the two extremities of the great *aèr* of Thessalonica, leads us to think that this typology of liturgical veils had a temporary dual function during the phase of transition from one use to another in the fourteenth century, both in the official Eucharist liturgy and in the rites of the great week. Indeed the *epitáphios*, due to the evident emphasis on the symbolic interpretation of the *aèr* as Christ's funeral shroud, became an essential piece in the rites of the Holy Week, which were increasingly characterised in the Greek metropolitan tradition by a celebrative scenographic realism. That it was precisely the fourteenth century to have represented the turning point in this change in the destination of the use of the *aèr* seems to be confirmed by the Athonite *typikòn* contained in the Cod. Vatop. Gr. 954 (1199), dated to 1346. Then, at the conclusion of matins of Holy Saturday while the great Doxology was being sung, the priest was to carry the book of the Gospels no longer resting on his chest, which was the custom, but on his right shoulder, wrapped in the *aèr* like in a shroud, in imitation of Joseph of Arimathea who carried the body of the Lord to its burial place. While today, at the end of vespers on Holy Friday, the *epitáphios* is removed from the sanctuary and placed together with the book of the Gospels and with the benedictional cross, on the ark, a domed baldacchino covered with flowers (fig. 19), or – in the Russian usage – in the shape of a sarcophagus (fig. 20). Songs of praise, that is the funeral lament of Christ, are sung in front of the ark on the morning of Holy Saturday; during this office the *epitáphios*, always in the ark, is carried in a procession and at the end of the rite – which was reported for the first time in a *trébnik*, that is a Slav eucology

of the sixteenth century according to Dimitrios Pallas and Robert Taft – it is laid on the altar where it remains throughout the Easter period until Ascension Day (fig. 21). It is significant that in transferring the *epitáphios* from the sanctuary to the centre of the church, where the ark is – and in the monasteries of Mount Athos (fig. 22) and in Russia (fig. 23), and also in the procession outside - the priest or priests carry it directly on their heads, exactly as the *aèr* used to be carried in the rite of the Great Entrance according to the iconographic representations.

When this veil of such great size fell into disuse in Eucharistic liturgy – where the use of much smaller square *aéres* becomes the norm – and its consequent adoption in the rites of the Great and Holy Week, in the decorative typology of the *aèr-epitáphios* we may observe a dual interlacing of elements of continuity and discontinuity. The latter regard essentially the liturgical texts of reference that are embroidered on the veil in symbiosis with the figures. These texts, which initially related to the Eucharistic celebration or to the communion of the faithful, are later substituted by others which are expressly linked to the rites of Holy Friday. Instead as far as continuity is concerned the insertion of a new iconographic motif of flying angels in the act of expressing their pain and astonishment – a theme that is strictly connected with the new liturgical context of the funeral lament of Christ – does not substitute but tends rather to flank the previous one of the angel-deacons holding the *rhipídion* in their hands, which is still linked to the Eucharistic iconography of the *melismòs*.

If the fourteenth century *epitáphios* of the metropolitan Anthony of Eraclea (fig. 24) – now in the treasury of the Serb monastery of Studenica – adds a fifth sorrowing angel deacon to the four angel-deacons officiating, the inscription is decidedly ambiguous, as it is the dialogue of Christ with the good thief on Good Friday, in the no longer used form from the end of the hymn which substitutes the cherubic hymn on Holy Thursday at the Great Entrance (“As a thief I will confess to you: Remember me, oh Lord, in your kingdom!”). Already the *epitáphios* of the Moldavian monastery of Putna, which was however embroidered in a Serbian environment between 1376 and 1400 by Princess Eufemia and by Queen Euprassia, bears as a liturgical inscription one of the songs of praise of Good Friday matins. In 1428 the *epitáphios* of the Metropolitan Macarios of Moldavia (fig. 25) the number of flying and sorrowing angels (five) surmounts that of the officiating angel-deacons (four), but the Greek inscription – which frames the symbols of the four Evangelists – is purely liturgical, as is the *ekphónesis* which precedes the *Holy* (“Singing, shouting, exclaiming, saying the victory hymn: Holy, Holy, Holy”). In common with the latter, the fourteenth century *epitáphios* of the Meteors (fig. 26), which is kept at the principal monastery of the Transfiguration, presents the starry background and the insertion of the tetramorph inside the borders at the four corners: the angel-deacons with the *rhipídia* and the flying angels are equal in number (two plus two) and underneath we have a “six-winged” seraphim and two “many-eyed” cherubim. The long liturgical inscription ends with the first verse of the songs of praise of Good Friday (“You have been laid down in a tomb, oh Christ who is life, and the awed armies of angels render glory to your indulgence”). Analogous to the latter for the absence of officiating angels - and for the presence of two “six-winged” seraphim and of two “many-eyed” cherubim – is the 1484 *epitáphios* of the monastery of Moldovita (fig. 27), which

is completely surrounded by an inscription in Slav evoking its utilization at Easter, as it is the first *apolytikion* tropary of the Good Friday Vespers: “The noble Joseph, once he had taken your immaculate corpse down from the wood, wrapped it in a shroud pure with aromas and attended to it for the last rites and laid it in a new sepulchre”. Moreover this tropary was sung – as Demetrio Ghemistos testifies – in the patriarchal liturgy of St. Sofia, at the end of the Grand Entrance, by all the bishops, priests and deacons, while they held up the *aèr*, before laying it on the *dískos* and on the chalice, and still today the priest recites it while he covers with the *aèr* the gifts placed on the altar.

In all the aforementioned examples the figure of Christ is inclined three-quarters, like in the *melismòs*. Now, as a demonstration of the passage of the veil from *aèr* to *epitáphios*, Christ is increasingly portrayed lying on the stone of unction, one of the most important Constantinople relics of the Passion. This is the rectangular slab of red stone on which Christ, dead, was supposedly sprinkled with unguent: according to Nicetas Choniata, the emperor Manuel Comnenos had the slab brought from Ephesus, and with an enormous effort he carried it on his own shoulders from the port to the palace of Boukoleon at the church of the Faro (lighthouse) into the Great Palace, and at his death the slab was transferred to his tomb in the funeral chapel of the monastery of the *Pantrokrator*.

The best known *epitáphios* with Christ lying on the stone of unction is the one conserved in the *Museo di S. Marco* in Venice (fig. 28), which has been dated by Maria Theochari – on very weak grounds – as being of the last decade of the thirteenth century: it shows two officiating angels with the *rhipídia*, the animals of the tetramorph, in their borders at the four corners, and a background of clypeate crosses (substituted in the eighteenth century by a piece of embroidery on different cloth, which might however reproduce the original). An isolated detail is the presence of a book of the Gospels in Christ’s hands: in this regard it is possible to observe how the Evangelary is still placed on the ark today, right above the *epitáphios*. Among the *epitáphia* that reproduce the same scheme – the Christ on the stone, only angels with the *rhipídia*, two in number, and the symbols of the four evangelists framed in the corners, besides the background of clypeate crosses – is reminiscent of the “Shepherd of the Bulgars” (that is the Greek archbishop of Ochrida), donated to Emperor Andronicus II Paleologue (1281-1328) at the cathedral of St. Sofia of Ochrida (fig. 29), which was then transferred to the church of the Virgin *Peribleptos* in the fifteenth century – when the cathedral became a mosque – and from 1988 to the National History Museum of Sofia. A border with the communion of the apostles was sewn on the left hand side of this veil, which has now become detached: there are grounds for thinking that there was another, sewn on the right hand side, which has now been lost. It is therefore an *aèr-epitáphios*, in everything analogous to the one of Thessalonica, to which moreover it is absolutely coeval. Some variation may be found in the *epitáphios* of Nicola Eudaimonoianis, dated 1406/7 (fig. 30), taken to Naples from Sicily in 1628 and since 1863 at the Victoria and Albert Museum of London: in the place of the tetramorph we have the busts of the respective Evangelists and, an important detail as regards its use, there are embroidered both of the *apolyíkia* troparies of the Vespers of Good Friday when the *epitáphios* is placed in the ark. Besides the tropary already embroidered on the Moldovita veil, the other tropary is also present here: “to the

awestruck women, standing near the tomb, the angel cried: myrrh is good for mortals, but Christ has shown himself to be enemy of corruption". Finally, in the *epitáphios* of the great Muscovite prince Dimitrij Semiakha, dated 1449 – but more probably of 1444 (fig. 31) – already at the monastery of Jur'ev and since 1925 at the Museum of Novgorod, the angels with the *rhipídia* become four and the symbols of the evangelists pass into the border, always at the four corners, but together with the clypeated busts of twenty-four saints.

At the explicit completion of the transformation of the *aèr* into *epitáphios*, and of the correspondent evolution in its liturgical use, the *epitáphios* of the Meteors bears the title *Ho epitáphios thrénos*, that is "the funeral lament" (like the Chiliandari one at Monte Athos in the Slav language, a gift to the monastery by Archbishop John of Skoplje in the fourteenth century - fig. 32), and the *epitáphios* of the Moldavian metropolitan Macarios bears the title *Ho entaphiasmòs*, that is "the burial". Conversely in an *epitáphios* of 1460, donated to the monastery of St John the Theologian at Patmos by the metropolitan Matthew of Myra, the Christ – also in this case lying on the stone of unction – is still designated with the term *Amnòs*, that is Lamb. Today moreover, from the post-Byzantine period onwards, the total oblivion of the original function of the *aèr* and the emotional emphasis which has come to surround the *epitáphios* have iconographically enriched this burial scene and Christ's funeral lament. Some human beings have been added to the sorrowing incorporeals: in the first place there is the Virgin mother and the favourite disciple, both prostrate but contained in their grief, then there is Mary Magdalene who is visibly desperate, with the other two women and the faithful Joseph and Nicodemus. The most ancient example of *epitáphios* completed with characters from the scene of the lament is perhaps the Cozia one of 1422, which was published by Millet in 1947; here we present this post-Byzantine one of the monastery of the Mother of God *Panáchrantos* on the island of Andros (fig. 33), dated 1657.

Now this emphatic representation of the *melismòs*, that is of the dead Christ, has returned to the altar in the form of the *antiménsion*. It is, as may be deduced from the etymology, a square veil – of linen or silk, decorated and containing fragments of relics – which may be consecrated by the bishop and thus allowed to substitute the altar in open air celebrations or other settings outside the church or in churches which are as yet without a consecrated altar. Its use – we do not know how ancient it was – received a decisive boost during the second iconomachia, therefore at the beginning of the fourteenth century, when members of the Orthodox Church took care to avoid celebrating on altars consecrated by heterodox bishops or which had in any case been contaminated by celebration by iconoclast priests or those which had still not received due consecration because of the lack of iconophilic bishops. Despite repeated warnings – for example by the Patriarchs Emmanuel II around the year 1240 and Matthew I in 1400 – to use the *antiménsion* only in the absence of a consecrated altar, today it is prescribed in every Eucharistic liturgy as a guarantee that the celebration takes place in communion with the local bishop who consecrated it. The *antiménsion* then remains permanently on the altar, folded under the Evangelary, and it is unfolded immediately before the Great Entrance.

In the more ancient examples of this liturgical veil (a good collection may be seen at the Byzantine Museum of Athens) the subjects are variable – and they range from the cross on the symbol of Calvary (figs. 34-35) to the Eucharist chalice (fig. 36) and to the *ákra tapeínosis* (which corresponds to the Latin *imago pietatis*) (fig. 37). However, in the sixteenth century—the scene of the *epitáphios thrénos* appears (though it only becomes widespread in the nineteenth century), with all the canonical characters of the scene of the lament and, in the four corners, the evangelists or their symbols (fig. 38). The *antiménsion* – which came about by superimposing it on the *eiletòn*, which in its turn has been likened to the Shroud of Christ, not only by Pseudo-Germanus, as we have seen, but already before then by Pseudo-Sophronius of Jerusalem and then by S. Simeon of Thessalonica – has thus assumed the same figurative typology of the *epitáphios*, which the latter had derived, without an apparent solution of continuity, from the *aèr*. It is no coincidence that along the border of the *antiménsion* is written the already quoted *apolytíkion* of Good Friday: «The noble Joseph, once he had taken your immaculate corpse down from the wood, wrapped it in a shroud pure with aromas and attended to it for the last care and laid it in a new sepulchre», with its explicit reference to the Shroud. The wheel has turned full circle: from the monumental *aèr* which, in the symbolism of the winding sheet, accompanied Christ to voluntary immolation in the bloodless re-enactment of His sacrifice, to the *epitáphios*, which then reappears, in the annual Easter celebration, as the focal point of the funeral lament of the entire Church, and to the *antiménsion*, on which each day is represented liturgically His mystery of death and resurrection (fig. 39), the terrible icon of Christ dead and deposited from the cross has become, in the succession and in the superimposition of these embroidered “shrouds”, a constant element in the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church.

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